

Sex Ratio Imbalances and China's Care for Girls Programme: A Case Study of a Social Problem*

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Abstract

In China, owing to many parents' preference for sons, the sex ratio at birth (SRB) is imbalanced. During the 2000s, SRB fluctuated at around 120 boys to 100 girls. In the early 2000s, to tackle the SRB imbalance, the Chinese government launched a series of policy measures under the banner of "care for girls." This article presents a case study of the Care for Girls programme in order to explore how the construction of SRB as a social problem has led to the formulation and adoption of one set of policy responses to the exclusion of others. The analysis shows that the imbalanced SRB has been attributed to rural peoples' cultural and economic deficiencies rather than cast in terms of a need to recognize the inherent worth of girls or a need to ensure that all rural families have entitlements to basic social welfare. This construction of SRB has enabled the Party-state to advance a "care as control" policy response which comprises ideological education, conditional material benefits and sanctions, and which sidesteps the institutional underpinnings of the problem.

Keywords: sex ratios; social problems; population policy; Care for Girls programme; ideological education; welfare; rural China

In 1990, Amartya Sen published a paper which drew attention to the startling fact that worldwide, and particularly in North and East Asia, millions of females were "missing" from their countries' populations.¹ The prerequisite condition for the

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1 Sen 1990.

masculinization of population sex ratios is son preference – the view held by some parents that sons are more valuable than daughters. Son preference characterizes societies with patrilineal family systems whereby adult sons stay with their parents to look after them in their old age while daughters marry into their husbands' families to produce sons who continue his family line.² In China, son preference has become manifest in a distorted sex ratio at birth (SRB) because fertility limitation policies and the increasing costs of raising children have forced parents to realize their desire for a son within the confines of fewer births. At the same time, technologies for sex-selective abortion have made it easier for parents to act on their son preference.³ During the 1980s, China's SRB was 108 boys per 100 girls. In 1990, the ratio rose to 111, and by 2008, it had reached 120.⁴ For reference, the SRB in societies without son preference is 104–107.⁵

Although surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s suggested that the SRB in China was becoming ever more skewed, it was only in the early 2000s that the imbalance was openly recognized as a social problem and drew a concerted policy response. The delay occurred because China's leadership feared that recognizing and confronting the problem would imply criticism of the nation's birth planning policies. Indeed, much to the chagrin of the Party-state leadership, when criticizing China on human rights grounds, international commentators often highlighted the SRB dimension of the country's birth planning record.⁶ However, eventually a convergence of factors, including mounting statistical evidence, led to public recognition of SRB distortions as a "social problem," and a series of countermeasures was launched in 2003 under the banner of the Care for Girls programme.

This article draws on the literature about the construction of "social problems" in order to examine China's SRB imbalance and the Care for Girls programme. This literature is useful because it highlights the ways in which framing and representation conducts political work in contentious policy areas. Specifically, a vast literature on social problem construction, much of it pertaining to illiberal dimensions of policy formation and implementation in liberal democracies, has shown that social problems are commonly defined in terms of the deficiencies of the policy beneficiaries. This is so that solutions then entail the provision of help to ameliorate these deficiencies rather than enact changes to the wider institutional order. At the same time, the use of help or care to address the social problem mitigates the need for the use of coercion in the exercise of social control because expressions of affection for the policy beneficiaries encourage them to buy into the elite's definition of the nature of the problem and the solution.⁷

2 Das Gupta et al. 2003; Lee, James Z., and Wang 1999.

3 Banister 2004; Chu 2001.

4 Hesketh 2009.

5 Banister 2004, 21.

6 See, e.g., <http://www.allgirlsallowed.org/about/statistics>.

7 Edelman 1974; Jackson 1994; Jamrozik and Nocella 1998.

The present article draws on data about China's formal policy response to the SRB imbalance. These data were obtained from national, provincial, county, township and village administrative levels during month-long field trips in December 2006, December 2007, and July and December 2008. At the national level, I interviewed key informants from the Care for Girls leading group in the National Population and Birth Planning Commission as well as demographers from the National Population and Development Research Centre: the latter institution falls under the auspices of the former. At the provincial level, I interviewed officials from the Jiangxi Population and Birth Planning Commission. I also interviewed county, township and village-level birth planning officials from three counties in Jiangxi, including one which was a national-level Care for Girls pilot county.⁸ As background, Jiangxi is an agricultural province located in China's south-east interior and has for the past two decades ranked among the provinces with the greatest SRB imbalance. In 2000, it was one of three provinces with an SRB over 135 and one of 11 provinces with an SRB over 120.⁹ Jiangxi is, therefore, a setting in which state action to address SRB imbalances has been visible and urgent. Additional sources include Chinese language documents published between 2000 and 2012. These are national, provincial and county government web pages, policy documents and Party newspaper articles, all of which pertain directly to the Care for Girls programme. Lastly, I viewed three CDs produced by the Care for Girls leading group of the Jiangxi Population and Birth Planning Commission.

This article begins by considering how the construction of a social problem influences the form and substance of the policy interventions and, at the same time, produces a particular kind of relationship between state actors and members of the targeted social group. I then review the political background to the recognition and construction of SRB as a social problem in China. Next, the empirical heart of the article explores how social problem construction has influenced both the substance of the Care for Girls interventions and the relationship between state actors and rural society. This part of the discussion scrutinizes the core components of the Care for Girls programme, which comprise ideological measures to tackle rural people's cultural and attitudinal deficiencies; conditionally conferred material incentives to address the role of rural economic backwardness in underpinning son preference; and sanctions imposed against rural people who engage in the "two illegals" of foetal sex identification and sex selection. The analysis demonstrates that these three components of the Care for Girls programme cumulatively position the state as pedagogue, protector and disciplinarian of the rural populace. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the institutional causes of SRB imbalances that are elided by the official construction of SRB and by the Care for Girls policy approach.

8 Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

9 Attané 2009.

The Construction of Social Problems

A rich literature on social problems reveals that they are not “objective and identifiable societal conditions that have intrinsically harmful effects.”¹⁰ Instead, social problems emerge through a process of definition embedded within prevailing political language and cultural symbols that carry certain kinds of emotional resonance.¹¹ For reference, “political language” refers to forms of language that shape understandings of what officials and the general public perceive to be legitimate; “cultural symbols” refer to concepts, images, objects and actions that simultaneously represent and serve as vehicles for communicating shared values, norms and beliefs; and “emotion” refers to displays of feeling.¹² Language, symbols and emotion overlap in conveying the central organizing ideas that constitute “frames.” Frames, in turn, determine which interpretations of a problem prevail and imply certain solutions.¹³

Frames matter because in order to gain currency, social problems must be articulated in ways that draw on and contribute to the symbolic backdrop against which dominant political discussions about national development and destiny occur.¹⁴ In liberal democracies, civil society actors and pressure groups struggle to influence the processes of problem recognition and definition. At the same time, members of the helping professions play a major role in defining and tackling social problems.¹⁵ In China, however, the political elite and members of state bureaucracies monopolize the processes of defining and tackling social problems, particularly those pertaining to “population problems,” and keep these processes secret.¹⁶ Examples of core political discussions that have shaped the processes of defining and tackling the skewed SRB in China include the implications of population size for per capita GDP¹⁷ and the implications of rural cultural and economic backwardness for national modernization.¹⁸

Frames also matter because, as mentioned, they are often used to equate the essence of social problems with the characteristics of the targeted social group. This has been illustrated in Murray Edelman’s analysis of “helping” as a political symbol in liberal democracies.¹⁹ Edelman argues that when members of the elite receive subsidies from public funds, they are not positioned as individual beneficiaries within a dependency relationship. Instead, the subsidies are portrayed as investments in the national economy more broadly, while the causes of the

10 Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, 53.

11 Hilgartner and Bosk 1988.

12 Some writers stress language and symbols, e.g. Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993, 31 (cited in Weinburg 2009, 62) who argue that claims-making has a “symbol and language bound character.” See also Edelman 1960. Others, like Steinmetz 1999, stress cultural symbols and emotion. Some highlight emotion, e.g. Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Jamrozik and Nocella 1998.

13 Entman 1993.

14 Edelman 1960; Padamsee 2009.

15 Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Jamrozik and Nocella 1998.

16 Wang, Cai and Chu 2013, 118.

17 Ibid.

18 Greenhalgh 2001.

19 Edelman 1974.

problems are assumed to be institutional. However, when those who are less powerful receive help, both the beneficiaries and the causes of their problems are starkly personified: they epitomize poverty, backwardness and feebleness.²⁰ Here, emotion is potent in representing people's deficiencies because it helps to convert the institutional causes of social problems into personalized ones.²¹ As objects of sympathy, vulnerable people do not receive a greater share of societal wealth or rights. Rather, across a range of political contexts, they are helped by means of ideological measures to encourage behavioural change, and by conditional material incentives to support them in undertaking behavioural change.²² In the event that they do not comply with policy requirements, the state may also resort to sanctions.

Finally, social problems are generally framed in ways that buttress the authority and actions of those agencies charged with tackling them.²³ When social problems are framed as requiring the provision of help or care to particular people, the authority of these agencies is reinforced in at least two ways. First, both the elite and the vulnerable are bound "emotionally and cognitively within a framework of the dominant group's definition," which deflects attention away from conflicting interests.²⁴ For instance, care has long been invoked in implementing China's contentious population policies. Cecilia Milwertz observed during the 1980s and 1990s that birth planning workers cultivated a "care as control" relationship with urban Chinese women in order to gain their acceptance of the one-child policy.²⁵ Additionally, it is no coincidence that during the 2000s an "idiom of care" has prevailed in China's media and policy discourses about vulnerable people at a time when socio-economic inequalities have reached unprecedented levels.²⁶ Second, the use of language, symbols and emotion in policymaking enables a *state-effect* to be exerted: namely, through spectacle, the state makes itself real as a particular kind of entity in relation to society, defining the characteristics of both in the process.²⁷ So, the symbolic and emotional aspects of policymaking are as much a part of the phenomenon of the state as the organizations which control coercion.²⁸

Recognizing and Framing of Sex Ratio Imbalances as a Social Problem in China

In China, as noted, the recognition and framing of SRB have been undergirded by assumptions that the SRB imbalance can be attributed to rural people's

20 Ibid.

21 Jamrozik and Nocella 1998, 10–11.

22 Jackson 1994.

23 Edelman 1974.

24 Jackson 1994, 15.

25 Milwertz 1997.

26 Sun 2009, 55–71.

27 Steinmetz 1999, 9; Mitchell 1999.

28 Steinmetz 1999, 8.

cultural and economic backwardness, the same assumptions and explanations that underpin the framing of the problem of China's "oversized" population more generally. In official discourse, cultural backwardness has been largely explained as a legacy of "rural feudal culture." This framing disconnects the impact of gender bias on family formation from present policies and conditions, for instance, the effects of the birth planning policies or economic vulnerabilities in the market economy era.²⁹ Rural people's economic backwardness has likewise been explained in terms of their deficiencies, for example their human capital limitations, although considerable attention has simultaneously been paid to a wider lack of resources per capita. This framing subsumes measures for addressing SRB imbalances within wider policy concerns aimed at increasing human capital investment and income per capita, notably, policies to reduce population size and increase economic growth.³⁰ Such framing also places the SRB imbalance within policy fields in which the Party-state has exhibited considerable competence.

Three main phases can be identified in recognizing and framing SRB as a social problem in China.³¹ These phases are denial combined with cursory acknowledgement, which dominated throughout the 1980s; tentative recognition with a focus on rural feudal culture and son preference, which commenced in the early 1990s; and open recognition of SRB as a problem with a focus on its potentially destabilizing consequences, which has prevailed since the early 2000s.³²

The first phase, denial, occurred in the decade after the launch of China's one-child policy in 1979–1980. During the early post-revolutionary years, the topic of SRB was mostly taboo because, as mentioned, the state's legitimacy lay in attaining per capita growth targets and reducing population size was central to this.³³ Nevertheless, some demographers, notably Professor Zhu Chuzhu 朱楚珠 from Xi'an Jiaotong University 西安交通大学, quietly conducted research to investigate evidence of SRB imbalances.³⁴ When in the early 1980s several landmark national population policy documents acknowledged in passing that fertility limitation policies could contribute to SRB imbalances, the occurrence was dismissed as small scale.³⁵ At the same time, members of the population establishment assumed that SRB imbalances were a temporary phenomenon that would be eventually remedied through ongoing birth planning ideological education and through the economic development that would occur in rural areas.³⁶

During the 1980s and 1990s, even though statistics from various surveys indicated that SRB distortions were widening, many commentators in China doubted

29 Greenhalgh 2001.

30 Wang, Cai and Chu 2013, 118.

31 Greenhalgh 2013, 135–37.

32 Ibid.

33 Wang, Cai and Chu 2013, 118.

34 Hvistendahl 2011, 164.

35 Greenhalgh 2001.

36 Ibid.

their reliability. They suspected that because of the concealment of female births, the imbalance was not as grave as the figures indicated.³⁷ Nevertheless, owing to the influence of debates on “gender inequality” and infringements against women’s rights that were occurring in international arenas – for instance, at the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development – Chinese delegates had to at least indicate that their country was responsible and took such matters seriously.³⁸ Discussions about and acknowledgement of the SRB problem therefore occurred, but tentatively and within closed quarters.

Even though the problem of the skewed SRB was not openly recognized in China during the 1990s, Chinese policymakers began to pay increasing attention to the effect of rural feudal culture on the gendering of family formation. However, it was the implications for population numbers rather than for SRB that concerned them. Specifically, they had noted that in rural areas, parents’ strong desire for a son fuelled widespread resistance to the one-child policy and increased the numbers of excess quota births. Therefore, policymakers in several provinces, including Jiangxi, accommodated son preference by permitting those rural parents experiencing “hardship” to wait for four years and then try again for a son; “hardship” referred euphemistically to having only a daughter.³⁹ Policymakers subsequently formulated the administrative categories of “daughter-only household” and “two-daughter household” to facilitate the monitoring and management of the fertility of these parents, and in the process inadvertently reinforced popular associations between being sonless and being disadvantaged.⁴⁰

It was in the third phase of recognizing SRB as a social problem, beginning in the early 2000s, that the imbalance began to attract direct and open attention. This was in part owing to evidence becoming available from surveys conducted in previous years. For instance, during the mid-1990s, with funding from the Ford Foundation, professors Zhu Chuzhu and Li Shuzhuo 李树茁 conducted research into the factors affecting the survival of female infants in rural areas in Shaanxi province, and in 1998, they presented their findings to the State Birth Planning Commission.⁴¹ Then, when the State Birth Planning Commission conducted a nationwide “clean-up” of the underreporting of births in 1999, it found that in most provinces more male than female births were underreported.

This clean-up suggested that the official SRB figures had underestimated the true extent of the imbalance.⁴² Subsequently, when the 2000 census showed an SRB of 117, it caused considerable alarm.⁴³ However, this alarm centred not on the plight of the missing girls, but on the implications of the SRB imbalance

37 Chen 2005.

38 Greenhalgh 2013.

39 Davin 1990; Greenhalgh 1993.

40 Greenhalgh 1993; Murphy 2003.

41 For some of the findings of this research published in English, see Li, Shuzhuo, Zhu and Feldman 2004.

42 Chen 2005.

43 Nie 2010, 206.

for the marriage market and on the threat that a rise in the numbers of rural bachelors would present for social order.⁴⁴ This catalyst for openly recognizing the SRB problem in China supports Bacchi's contention that social problems are only granted attention by policymakers when a threat to social order is perceived.⁴⁵ Notably, the SRB problem attracted even more attention because the alarm about its threat to social stability was raised just as the new Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao leadership (2003–2012) launched its broader policy commitment to build a “harmonious society.”⁴⁶

Against this background, a recalibration of the policy priorities of the birth planning establishment occurred. As already emphasized, the political elite's overriding priority was fertility limitation while a second priority was to improve the population's “quality” through increased per capita human capital investments. In the 2000s, a third priority of adjusting the structure of the population was added.⁴⁷ However, the addition of this third priority did not signify that official concerns about population structure had superseded concerns about numbers or the quality of subgroups such as rural people. Rather, the birth planning establishment continued to assert that rural people's lower quality exacerbated both birth rates and the structural anomaly of the SRB imbalance.⁴⁸ However, the inclusion of a third priority did create policy space for addressing the imbalance.

In 2000, population and birth planning officials met with demographers from policy institutes and universities to discuss SRB. Their discussions were informed in part by an exploratory project carried out by the Xi'an Jiaotong University demographers the previous year in Chaohu 巢湖 district, Anhui province, which aimed to address the causes of gender inequality in family formation. A decision was taken at the meeting to set up pilot districts in which experiments with co-ordinated measures to prevent sex-selective abortion were to be conducted. In March 2003, a Care for Girls expert group was formed, under the leadership of the National Population and Birth Planning Commission, to oversee the programme. The expert group comprised an official from the commission and four university-based demographers. In 2003, 11 pilot districts were chosen, and in 2004, 13 more were added. A Care for Girls co-ordination group was established in each pilot district to oversee the implementation of Care for Girls measures within their localities. The groups included representatives from the population and birth planning commission, the Women's Federation, the bureaus of health, education, labour, agriculture, finance, and civil affairs, the bureau of food and medicine regulation, the public security bureau and the procuratorate.⁴⁹

44 Chinese sources refer to the English language publication, Hudson and Den Boer 2004. See e.g. Mo 2005; Tang 2006; interview with director of the education and publicity office, Jiangxi Population and Birth Planning Commission, 5 December 2006; interview with Prof. Mu Guanzhong, department of demography, Peking University, 22 December 2006. See also Greenhalgh 2013.

45 Bacchi 1999.

46 Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, 172–79.

47 *Ibid.*, 134–37, 145.

48 Interview with head of Rivercounty Population and Birth Planning Commission, 15 December 2008.

49 Interview, Prof. Mu Guanzhong; Eklund 2011.

In March 2004, at a Central Government Population and Resource Environment Working Summit, the then-president, Hu Jintao, stated that within three to five years the rate of increase in SRB imbalances needed to be curbed and by 2020 the problem had to be completely resolved. To this end, he also stated that control of birth rates and sex ratios had to be jointly incorporated into the formal work evaluations of officials, so the SRB had to be rebalanced within the parameters of continuing fertility restrictions.⁵⁰ Then, in 2005, the Care for Girls expert group within the National Population and Birth Planning Commission drafted a document which subsequently formed the basis for an internal State Council Document, No. 59. This document was distributed to provincial, prefectural and city governments and instructed all levels of government to do a timely job in using ideological education, economic incentives and regulation to curb sex ratio imbalances.⁵¹ In 2006, the Care for Girls programme was formally extended across all counties.

The Care for Girls Programme

As noted, the principal components of the Care for Girls programme are ideological education, conditional material benefits and sanctions. From the perspective of social problem construction, each of these components maps onto officially endorsed explanations about the causes of SRB imbalances. “Ideology” uses visual displays, printed materials, television programmes and the school curriculum to persuade rural people to change their attitudes towards family formation: these measures are grounded in the view that the SRB imbalances are caused by deficiencies in rural mindsets and culture. “Material benefits” refers to assistance with education, living conditions and livelihoods, and access to life insurance, health care and old-age security. Together, these benefits cast the SRB problem as a fault of rural economic backwardness. The final type of intervention, monitoring and the enforcement of sanctions against the “two illegals,” resonates with official and popular ideas about SRB as a problem of order in rural society, with feudal patriarchy lying at the heart of this threat to order. As mentioned previously, in framing the causes of the imbalanced SRB in terms of the deficiencies of rural culture, economy and social order, these interventions cumulatively prescribe the kind of “care” that rural people are to receive whilst affirming the identity of the state as teacher, protector and disciplinarian.

Ideology

Ideology is a core tool used by the state to implement its population policies. In China, population-related ideological work is carried out by the “publicity and

⁵⁰ Tang 2006.

⁵¹ Interview with head of the Care for Girls leading group at the National Population and Birth Planning Commission, 22 December 2006.

education” offices which sit within population and birth planning commissions at national, provincial and county levels. The political role of the ideological education measures used in the Care for Girls programme may be elucidated with reference to Brown’s argument that the state does not simply address private needs but also appropriates the right to configure, administer and produce them.⁵² Specifically, the ideological education activities use language, symbols and emotion in ways that demonstrate rural people’s need for care, assert the right of the state to intervene in rural families’ reproduction, and soften the harsher dimensions of the state’s implementation of population policies. These semantic aspects of the ideological education activities are illustrated through selected examples below.

The role of language and symbols in dramatizing rural people’s deficiencies and in asserting the state’s right to intervene in their private lives can be seen in a publicity campaign called “a new wind of marriage and reproduction enters ten thousand families” (*hun yu xinfeng jin wan jia* 婚育新风进万家), which later became the main vehicle for Care for Girls public education. In this campaign, the phrase “enter ten thousand families” forms part of a wider state lexicon about policies, information, services and contraceptive devices “entering the household” (*ruhu* 入户).⁵³

The state’s use of language, symbols and emotion in claiming the right to intervene in rural people’s private lives is also evident in the example of the “little hands lead the big hands” scheme (*xiaoshou qian dashou* 小手牵大手). The logic behind the activities in this scheme is that primary and junior high school students learn for themselves, and then in turn teach the adults at home.⁵⁴ One of the activities included a lesson in a village primary school. According to the lesson plan, the students read about “an innocent and lively little girl who is only 11 years old and does not desire anything in life other than her grandfather’s affection.” However, her grandfather praises only her male cousin and dismisses her achievement in gaining the top grade in a maths test. Hurt, the protagonist thinks to herself, “do you really mean that girls have no promise? This is the 21st century. It is not possible to continue with the thought of favouring males over females.” After the students have finished the story, the teacher explains to them that: “Continuing the family line and favouring males is a feudal mentality that has been carried down for thousands of years, and is deeply rooted ... The grandfather in the story is that kind of person.” Then, the teacher asks the students whether or not they know of anyone who resembles either the grandfather or the girl, and how they would talk to them. Next, the class engages in

52 Brown 1995, 166–196.

53 Li, Bin 2006, 2.

54 Rivercounty Government Office Document No. 7. 2006. This document instructs all primary and middle schools to ensure that arrangements are in place for “big hands lead little hands” lesson plans and activities, and that excellent girls have been identified for praise. Visit to RH village primary school, 10 December 2007; visit to PB village primary school, 14 December 2007. During these visits, teachers explained that these activities occurred once or twice a year over a period of a few days.

discussion guided by the instruction, “When you have grown up and become parents or (paternal) grandparents, at that time society will be more advanced than it is now. Think about how you would deal with the problem of treating boys and girls.” The class ends with the reminder that: “understanding birth planning is the nation’s foundation policy and favouring boys over girls is wrong.”⁵⁵

In this lesson plan, several semantic elements overlap in constructing the social problem of SRB as well as the state and society relationship. One element is the use of language associations which naturalize the officially endorsed view that feudal culture causes SRB imbalances. Specifically, elderly people are linked with the word “feudal,” while young people are linked with the words “advanced” and the “nation’s foundation policy.” This binary resonates with a wider conflation of temporal and moral geographies in China’s official development discourse whereby rural people and the elderly are associated with tradition, backwardness and the past, while urban people and the young are associated with modernity, progress and the future.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, emotion is used to create a sense of empathy and connection among the readers that deflects attention away from the conflicts of interest and power inequalities contained within the nation’s birth planning policies. The emotion is generated in two ways: first, as is common in the public presentation of social problems, it is invoked by the telling of a highly personalized story,⁵⁷ in this case, that of a “rural girl child,” and second, through the symbol of interlinked hands printed on the class handouts.

The state’s use of language, symbols and emotion in dramatizing policy subjects’ need for care and in portraying the state’s intrusion in families’ reproduction in a “caring” light can also be seen in a documentary made in 2004.⁵⁸ It is the result of a collaboration between the provincial population and birth planning commission’s publicity and education office and the provincial and prefectural education bureaus, and was screened widely in both schools and village halls during 2006 and 2007. It tells the story of Xie Huimin, an 11-year-old girl who lives in a two-daughter family in one of the fieldwork counties. In the documentary, Xie Huimin’s parents migrate to evade the surveillance of local birth planning officials. The voice-over explains that Xie Huimin’s parents want to try for a son because the “old” grandfather is worried that the family line will end. The documentary depicts the daily struggles Xie Huimin faces as she misses her parents, does housework, cares for her infirm grandparents and carries her little sister to school in the rain. Under the guidance of her teacher, Xie Huimin writes five letters to her parents, pleading: “Do not give birth to little brother, please come home. When you are old I will look after you better than a son.” Her last letter causes them to relent. Her mother undergoes an abortion and is sterilized. The final scene depicts a sunny sky with birds in flight.

55 Wu 2006.

56 Liu, Xin 2000, 6–7.

57 Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, 62.

58 Jiangxi Television Station. 2004. *Xiaoshou qian dashou* (*Little Hands Lead Big Hands*).

In the documentary, the focus on an individual's emotional story elides matters which, had they been raised, would have brought into view other, institutional, explanations for SRB and therefore other possible policy solutions. Owing to previous fieldwork that I had conducted in X village where Xie Huimin's family happened to live,⁵⁹ I knew that the community comprised over five hundred households of which only two were "daughter only," both of which were immigrant families that had moved in during the late 1990s. These two families had been forced out of their previous villages because they were of a different ancestry to the dominant patrilineage, and when adjustments to village land allocations were anticipated, whether or not the families "belonged" to the patrilineage began to matter. The two families were able to relocate to X village, a village where others from their patrilineage lived, because custom recognized their entitlement to settle there. However, owing to their newcomer status, these families had the least political and economic leverage for resisting the imposition of birth planning quotas.

One aspect of the institutional underpinnings of SRB that is suggested by the circumstances in X village pertains to a political system that distributes power and resources among groups of agnatically-related men. In China, each village is an isolated pocket of self-governance that exists at the bottom of the country's administrative and economic hierarchies and is disconnected from other pockets, an arrangement which, in many localities, causes individuals to look inwards to their villages in order to strengthen their situation and to cope with the requirements and fallout of top-down policies. In this system too, land is distributed to male heads of households, so that a female's entitlement to land is contingent on her affiliation with a man, and in some villages, daughters are not even allocated land.⁶⁰ An alternative system would entail forming a wider interconnected rural constituency in which both men and women could assert and defend their interests and rights, including their rights to land.⁶¹ In such a system, the local symbolic and practical significance of males in the family and village community would likely decline as rural people would be more likely to look outwards beyond their villages to wider institutional arenas and localities in order to articulate their concerns, claim their entitlements and partake in broader societal and normative transformations.

The circumstances in X village also reveal that rural families face institutional obstacles in their efforts to provide for their families' present and future security in a rural welfare regime that still largely assumes family-based provisioning. For instance, in 2008 I revisited X village and learned that six months after the documentary had been made, Xie Huimin's parents had re-migrated. They were working 12-hour days making reconstituted wooden boards in a Guangdong factory. However, owing to rural people's exclusion from urban schools, health care,

59 Published as Liu, Liangqun, and Murphy 2006.

60 Bossen 2011; Kuhn 2006 cited in Liaw 2008, 237.

61 Murphy, Tao and Xi 2011. Also, Bossen 2011.

housing and social security, they could not take Xie Huimin and her sister with them to the city. Importantly, this situation is not unique. In China, in 2005, approximately 15 million children aged between 6 and 14 were left behind in the countryside with grandparents or other carers while both their parents worked in the cities.⁶² Rather than recognize the reasons for rural people's economic vulnerabilities, and by extension, their need for sons, the documentary-makers instead deftly harnessed the emotion generated by the daily hardships that Xie Huimin experienced on account of her parents' absence and directed it to the birth planning cause.

The use of language, symbols and emotion to personify the SRB social problem as well as to dramatize the policy subjects' need for care and the state's provision of this care could be further seen in a televised event held in a national-level Care for Girls pilot county in Jiangxi in September 2006.⁶³ One segment featured Zhao Guorong, a woman in her 40s who had been crippled by childhood polio and who had raised two daughters, then aged 18 and 16. When this family entered the stage, a song popular at televised charity events, "Dedication of love," played in the background.⁶⁴ The hostess told the audience that Zhao Guorong was a widow and that her family depended on her meagre income from assembling funeral decorations. Then, when invited to speak, Zhao said: "The state has let my daughters study. Thank you to the Party. Thank you to the state for letting my daughters study." At this point, members of the audience, mostly employees from county government departments, walked up to the stage to donate money while Zhao and her daughters wiped away their tears.

The hostess explained to the audience that, in 2004, Zhao's eldest daughter, Xie Lanlan, realized that her family could not afford for both her and her sister to study, so she quit her first year of senior high school and went to work in a factory in Xiamen city. On her departure, she told her mother: "I will earn money for sister to study. I will also resume my studies once I have earned enough money." When the head of the county population and birth planning commission, Ms Rao, also referred to in the programme as "Auntie Rao," learned about this situation, she visited Zhao Guorong and told her that the government would ensure that Xie Lanlan could finish high school. Ms Rao even arranged for a car to be sent to Xiamen to collect her. After the hostess's explanation, Ms Rao hugged Xie Lanlan and then the principal of the Nanchang Technical College joined them and gave Xie Lanlan an envelope containing her first year's tuition fees. A tearful Xie Lanlan told the audience, "Without care from aunts and uncles I could not have lived until today. Even though I have experienced many difficulties, I won't feel self-pity. I will work harder

62 Chan 2009.

63 Jiangxi Television Station. 2006. *Guan ai nühai xingdong wanhui (Care for Girls Campaign Variety Show)*.

64 This song is discussed in Sun 2009, 56–57.

and use hardship as motivation. I will work hard to repay the care of the mother country.”

The above examples exemplify the ways in which language, symbols and emotion help to construct the essence of a social problem in terms of the deficiencies/vulnerabilities of the policy subjects whilst at the same time enabling the state to exhibit its caring credentials.

Care and conditional material benefits

Material benefits are another important tool used by the state to implement its population policies. The material benefits used in the Care for Girls programme include support in education, living conditions, livelihoods, health insurance and old-age security. These benefits are advertised on the Care for Girls calendars, aprons and fans distributed door-to-door.⁶⁵ The political role of these benefits can be elucidated with reference to a broader literature that examines how *conditional* material assistance contributes to defining the nature of social problems, the characteristics of policy beneficiaries, and the authority of the political or professional elite.⁶⁶ Specifically, it casts light on the ways in which material benefits are used to position the beneficiaries as deficient and to facilitate the exercise of a “care as control” relationship in the process of policy implementation.

In the case of China’s Care for Girls programme, the material benefits are only given to those families that comply with a particularly stringent version of the birth planning policies. To be eligible, families must have obtained a “birth planning parents’ honour card,” which proves that the couple has either one child or two daughters (including adoptees), that one member of the couple has been sterilized, and that the wife is no older than 45.⁶⁷ It is telling that these criteria are even more stringent than the provincial birth planning regulations which permit rural parents with only a daughter to have another child. The stringent conditions that determine eligibility for the material benefits publicized under the Care for Girls banner deserve attention because if every family was to have access to old-age pensions and other forms of social security regardless of their reproductive status, the state might actually do better in achieving its demographic goals. The following paragraphs consider how different kinds of material benefits have enabled the state to demonstrate its caring credentials even though the principal purpose of these benefits is not to highlight the worth of girls or to care for rural people, but rather to encourage rural people’s adherence to stringent fertility restrictions.

One scheme partners daughter-only families with local officials and requires the latter to help the former obtain support from county and prefectural Care for Girls foundation funds to which government departments and local

65 In December 2006 and December 2008, I saw these in rural homes.

66 Edelman 1974; Jackson 1994; Joss, Fording and Schram 2011, 25.

67 Fu and Dai 2004.

businesses are obliged to donate.⁶⁸ Support from these foundation funds includes grants to help recipients pay for costs such as senior high school tuition fees or housing improvements, and microloans to help recipients start small businesses. The caring relationship that the state aims to construct with rural people through such support is exemplified in the words of one grateful widow who apparently told an official in the pilot county: “If there is no husband, then there is the government.”⁶⁹

Education-centred benefits include sponsorship and scholarships. The primary purpose of these benefits is to reward those parents who have restricted their fertility. Consequently, rural girls with brothers are excluded, even though they face the greatest competition for parental investment in their education.⁷⁰ One education sponsorship scheme is the Spring Buds programme (*chunlei jihua* 春雷计划). It is managed by the provincial and county women’s federations. Previously, the scheme allocated money to poor rural families to enable girls to continue their education. However, in several localities, the “help” that was formerly allocated through the Spring Buds programme was either re-routed through, or merged with, the Care for Girls programme. This meant that girls with brothers were no longer eligible.⁷¹ Another example is the Sunshine Education Assistance Project, which was rolled out in 2008 and involves government departments and co-opted businesses jointly sponsoring female high school students from “good birth planning families” for a total of 1,000 yuan per year for three years. This material support is presented to the recipients at very public ceremonies which invoke emotion in much the same way as the television programmes discussed in the previous section. The importance accorded by state authorities to this use of conditional material incentives in attaining demographic objectives is indicated by the formal incorporation of the Sunshine Project into county birth planning officials’ work evaluations, thereby affecting their pay and promotional prospects.⁷²

68 According to JXPBPC 2006, 150 out of 500 points in officials’ birth planning work evaluations are dedicated to Care for Girls targets, ten of which are awarded for establishing Care for Girls funds of at least 200,000 yuan. In many counties, officials had to donate to start the fund. Interview, director of the education and publication office, Jiangxi Population and Birth Planning Commission.

69 Interview with Population and Planning Commission at the national-level Care for Girls pilot county, Jiangxi, 18 December 2006.

70 Lee, Ming-Hsuan 2011.

71 See JXHSO 2004: “The provincial population and birth planning commission’s education and publicity office has helped co-ordination by ... having the women’s federation and the youth league tightly integrate Care for Girls with the Spring Buds programme.” Interview with Rivercounty Women’s Federation, 15 December 2006, and interview with WZ county Women’s Federation, 9 December 2006. For reports about counties using Spring Buds to help girls from “good birth planning households” stay in school, see Jiangxi Population and Birth Planning Commission. 2004. “Jiangxi: guan ai nühai xingdong jianxun liu ze” (Jiangxi: six bulletins on the Care for Girls campaign), China Population Net, 26 March, <http://209.85.129.104/search?q=cache:pLui1HzxtuAJ:www.gjjsw.gov.cn>. Accessed 3 November 2006.

72 Jiangxi Television Station. 2009. *Jiangxi Sunshine Study Help, Care for Girls: Helping Rural Girls to Continue Their Studies*, 29 December; interview, head of Rivercounty Population and Birth Planning Commission; JXPBPC 2008b; “Jiangxi shishi guan ai nühai yangguang zhuxue huodong” (Jiangxi implements the Care for Girls Sunshine Study Support activity), *Jiangxi Daily*, 17 September 2009.

An “exam points” benefit is a yet another form of help and entails adding points on to eligible students’ exam scores to assist their admission to senior high school. In Jiangxi, students receive an extra ten points for entry to a key-point senior high school, 20 points for an ordinary senior high school, and 30 points for a vocational high school.⁷³ The extra points become relevant when students’ scores fall just below entry cut-off points because they affect the fees that families must pay for their children’s non-compulsory education. For instance, in one county, even though in 2008 approximately 300 students were given an extra ten points, in only ten cases did the points make a difference.⁷⁴ However, even though few individuals actually benefit, the scheme is significant in again rewarding compliance with population policies rather than caring for girls or for rural children more generally.

Life insurance is a further benefit that rewards rural residents for complying with population policies while at the same time enabling the state to show how it “cares.” In Jiangxi, the life insurance scheme began in 2005 when an agreement was signed between the provincial population and birth planning commission and the provincial branch of the China Life Insurance Company whereby county governments would use their own funds – with additional small contributions from the provincial government – to buy “safe and sound” insurance. The insurance entitles eligible families to payouts in the event of the illness, injury or death of a child or parent. The symbolism used in delivering this insurance is noteworthy in exemplifying what one author has called “paternalism’s moral shroud of mutual obligation” in urging policy compliance.⁷⁵ In 2008, following a reorganization of the scheme, the insurance was renamed “compassionate life insurance,” or in Chinese, literally “love heart insurance” (*ai xin baoxian* 爱心保险).⁷⁶ On the cover of the insurance card, there is a photo of a smiling couple with their daughter set within a flowery heart frame. On the back, the text reads: “Thank you to your family for proactively practising birth planning. The government has paid for your family’s ‘birth-planning-family compassionate insurance’ to contribute some security to your child’s health and to your family’s happiness.”⁷⁷

Preferential health care is another benefit available to the members of “birth planning honour households.” Specifically, provincial regulations require county hospitals to give various fee exemptions to eligible children and to ensure that all

73 JXHSAO 2004; JXPBPC 2004.

74 Interview, head of Rivercounty Population and Birth Planning Commission.

75 Jackson 1994, 12.

76 JXPBPC 2008a. After reorganization in 2008, county and prefectural governments were to invite approved insurance companies to compete for business. In 2008, the insurance paid 6,000–10,000 yuan upon the death of a child, 20,000 yuan on a parent’s death, and reimbursements for a child’s medical expenses. In 2008, an annual fee of approximately 30 yuan was paid per child. The percentage breakdown of the contributions from the different levels of government was: province 17%; prefecture and county 60%; and township 23%.

77 Jiangxi Rural Birth Planning Family Compassionate Insurance Card, December 2008.

eligible families have the means to enrol in the new rural medical insurance co-operatives.⁷⁸

A final set of benefits pertain to old-age security. Measures to provide pensions include both local governments' improvised responses to calls from their superiors that they resolve daughter-only families' worries about old-age care, as well as more comprehensive schemes administered by higher levels of government. As an example of the former, county population and birth planning commissions have used their Care for Girls foundation funds to offer one-off payments of between 1,000 and 5,000 yuan to two-daughter families after a spouse has been sterilized, and even higher payments to one-daughter families after a spouse has been sterilized, payments which invariably have been used by birth planning officials to purchase old-age pensions. Another example is the "green old age" insurance scheme instigated in some Jiangxi counties whereby local governments give daughter-only families citrus trees or medicinal crops and relevant training so that after several years they can harvest a windfall. In conversation, one county deputy described green old age insurance as "a strategy for poor places."

More comprehensive old-age security is provided through the "national partial rural birth planning family reward and support system," which commenced in 2006. This scheme entitles rural parents over the age of 60 with either one child or two daughters to at least 50 yuan per month, although residents in richer provinces enjoy higher amounts. In 2009, the scheme was expanded to include rural people with spouses who had urban household registrations.⁷⁹ The scheme is managed and co-funded by central and provincial levels of government, although it is publicized locally in Care for Girls activities.⁸⁰ Indeed, the seeking out and inclusion of all eligible recipients into the scheme has been incorporated into the formal job evaluations of county and township birth planning officials.⁸¹ Clearly, state care is offered in manifold and visible ways to "support," "help" and "reward" those who adhere to stringent versions of the birth planning policies.

Care as "compensation"

It is necessary to note, however, that the benefits promoted in the name of Care for Girls are not always viewed or represented as "support" or "reward" by rural people. Instead, owing to a discursive focus on state care, the material benefits delivered under the Care for Girls banner have often been unwittingly portrayed

78 JXHD and JXPBC 2006. Exemptions for registration fees, injections and prescriptions, and discounts for chest x-rays, bed fees and nursing costs.

79 JXPBPC 2009; JXPBPC and JXFO 2010.

80 The percentage splits in contributions between the centre and province are: eastern regions 20:80; central regions (including Jiangxi) 50:50; and western regions 80:20.

81 JXPBPC 2006. In 2006, 45 out of 500 points in official's birth planning work evaluations were for implementing birth planning families' rural insurance. Interview with Rivercounty Population and Birth Planning Commission, 15 December 2006.

and understood as a form of “compensation” given to sonless families in recognition of their difficulties in achieving economic self-reliance. This unintentional framing of the material benefits can be seen in the testimonies of Mr Liu and Mr Zhang, who I met in Jiangxi in December 2006. Both men were from public speaking teams which travelled from village to village publicizing the new Care for Girls policies. Mr Liu explained that for many years he could not hold his head up high: not only was his a two-daughter household, it was one of the poorest in his village. Then, under the Care for Girls programme, the county government helped him to obtain a loan of 20,000 yuan in order to establish a business trading in peanuts and beans. Mr Liu subsequently “prospered through hard work” and built a warehouse on land procured for him by the township government. According to Mr Liu, thanks to state support, he has been able to tell those who have heckled his speeches: “Boys may bring reputation but only girls truly bring a happy lot.”⁸²

Like Mr Liu, Mr Zhang explained that after his wife had given birth to two daughters, his family was pitied by other villagers. He also stressed the different kinds of “care” that had been given to his family by the state. For example, in 1996, even before the start of Care for Girls, the village government exempted his family from the-then compulsory labour contributions. Next, in the early 2000s, the township government helped him to secure a loan so that he could run the township petrol station. More recently, the county government had arranged for Mr Zhang’s daughters to enjoy the “exam point benefit,” which had helped them to gain entry to the county senior high school. With county government help, Mr Zhang and his wife also enrolled in an old-age pension scheme. Mr Zhang explained: “The policies are good. When I started doing the public speaking, everyone said I was stupid. They said: ‘You’ve been sterilized. You have no son. You’re not worth listening to.’ But now they see that I’m doing well.”⁸³ In both Mr Liu and Mr Zhang’s accounts, the focus is on the state’s provision of care rather than on either the worth of girls or rural people’s welfare entitlements.

Sanctions

The final dimension of the Care for Girls programme is sanctions to deter people from engaging in the “two illegals” of foetal sex identification and sex-selective abortion.⁸⁴ The “caring” interventions of ideological education and conditional material benefits arose largely in response to a growing awareness within population policy circles that a confrontational and coercive approach was inadequate when dealing with SRB imbalances. Prohibition has proved unsuccessful because son preference has persisted; the use of technologies for determining family

82 Interview with Mr Liu, 16 December 2006.

83 Interview with Mr Zhang, 16 December 2006.

84 See Tan 2008 for regulations against the two illegals.

formation has gained wide acceptability; health care services are decentralized and largely unregulated; and a facial expression or tone of voice can easily communicate foetal sex.⁸⁵

It was only after the start of the Care for Girls programme in 2003/4 that measures to publicize and implement existing prohibitions against the “two illegals” intensified. At that time, targets to combat the “two illegals” and curb SRB imbalances were incorporated into officials’ formal work evaluations. Thereafter, provincial governments, Jiangxi among them, instituted further rulings aimed at limiting people’s opportunities to engage in the “two illegals,” including: (1) if a woman wants to have an abortion after 14 weeks she must first obtain permission from the county population and birth planning commission. If an abortion is conducted without this permission, the woman forfeits her right to a second pregnancy; (2) abortion pills must not be sold or distributed without prescription; and (3) two practitioners must be present when an ultrasound device is in use.⁸⁶ In addition, in 2009, in Jiangxi and ten other provinces, the requirement that couples leave a four-year gap between their first and second births was scrapped. This change was to prevent couples from using spacing as a loophole in order to justify sex-selective abortion.⁸⁷

In August 2011, efforts to enforce the “two illegals” were further intensified when the National Population and Birth Planning Commission launched a campaign which it described as “an inevitable necessity for promoting gender equality and for maintaining social harmony and stability.”⁸⁸ The campaign ran for eight months and was overseen by representatives from five ministries (birth planning, health, food and medicine supervision, public security and the procuratorate), as well as representatives from the Women’s Federation. It incorporated two moves. The first was an ideological education drive that used television, newspapers and the internet to highlight the harm that the “two illegals” bring “to family and society” and to publicize cases of transgressors who had been dealt with harshly before the law. The second entailed strengthening surveillance over the use of ultrasound and abortion medicines. The campaign announcement stated that this twin-pronged approach was intended to “generate shocking reverberations throughout society” so that both individuals and health professionals would increase their own “self regulation” regarding sex-selective abortion.

Coercive measures to combat SRB imbalances were stepped up at the same time that “caring” interventions were gaining ascendancy for three reasons. First, the state recognized that a combination of ideological education and

85 Tan 2008. One cadre I interviewed explained that sex-selective abortion was available, interview with a former village birth planning cadre, Rivercounty, 20 December 2007.

86 Zheng 2005, 7; JXPBPC 2009.

87 JXPBPC 2009.

88 National Population and Birth Planning Commission, Department for Education and Propaganda. 2011. “Quanguo jizhong zhengzhi ‘liang fei’ zhuan xiang xingdong dianshi dianhua huiyi zhaokai” (Nationwide video-conference meeting convened on the campaign to concentrate on rectifying the “two illegals”), 16 August, http://www.chinapop.gov.cn/xwzx/zwyw/201108/t20110816_363529.html. Accessed 8 November 2011.

conditional material benefits would not be sufficient in all circumstances to bring about the requisite behavioural change. Second, publicity about relevant laws is itself a component of ideological education. Third, such actions arguably enhance the state's visibility as the preserver of "social harmony" and protector of the nation's future.

Limiting the availability of sex-selective abortion may still play a role in rebalancing the SRB in China, as indicated by the case of South Korea where the prohibition of sex-selective abortion is credited with helping to normalize its SRB within two decades.⁸⁹ However, China differs from South Korea in at least two respects. First, China lacks the institutionalized and independent supervisory mechanisms necessary for the sustained enforcement of bans against sex-selective abortion and has instead relied on the unstable mechanism of campaigns. Second, China is a large and diverse country and has not yet attained a uniform level of socio-economic development, which, in South Korea, has reduced parents' reliance on sons for old-age financial support and enabled large numbers of daughters to live closer to their parents, contributing to normative change.⁹⁰ Hence, a crackdown on the availability of sex-selective abortion in China is unlikely to lead to a straightforward replication of the South Korean experience.

Conclusion

The Care for Girls programme merits study because it constitutes China's formal policy response to a severe SRB imbalance and is therefore a crucial component of the most intrusive birth planning programme ever carried out in human history. This article has focused on the Care for Girls programme in order to analyse how the SRB imbalance has been constructed and addressed as a social problem. By drawing on the literature pertaining to the construction of social problems in illiberal policy domains within liberal democracies, it has been possible to identify and elucidate the nature of the mechanisms also used in constructing and addressing the SRB within the Care for Girls programme in China. These principally include the framing of the social problem in terms of the beneficiaries' cultural, economic and behavioural deficiencies, which in turn permit the advancement of remedies centred on ideology to promote behavioural change, conditional material support to reward behavioural change, and discipline to support enforcement, all delivered through symbols of affection. As demonstrated, with regard to SRB in China, by using meanings, assumptions and a repertoire of cultural, political and organizational practices drawn from a particular socio-cultural and political context, state actors have framed the problem and devised solutions in ways that affirm their pedagogic, protector and disciplinarian role. Cumulatively, therefore, this case study of the Care for Girls programme lends support to a wider body of literature which argues that the

89 Chun and Das Gupta 2009.

90 Ibid.

construction and solving of social problems produce and sustain social and political hierarchies.

However, even though liberal democracies have illiberal elements, China differs in at least one important respect: in China, the process of defining and tackling sensitive social problems is dominated by a secretive political elite. This has particularly been the case with population problems, which have fallen under the remit of an elite within the population and birth-planning apparatus.⁹¹ Yet, as Greenhalgh argues, the elite's approach does not appear to have succeeded in normalizing the SRB. One Chinese source states that the slight fall in the SRB – from 120.7 in 2008 to 117.8 in 2011 – may be an “artefact of measurement” rather than a real reduction in masculinization.⁹² Meanwhile, the renowned demographer Li Shuzhuo reports that even though the interventions initially ushered in some positive results, the long-term effectiveness has been undermined by regulations sustaining gender inequality, difficulties in implementing policies, and a dearth of resources for dealing with the SRB problem in a political environment in which other priorities dominate.⁹³ If the voices of people from other state agencies and from civil society more broadly were to be accorded a greater role in the processes of understanding and tackling SRB imbalances, then perspectives that engage with the institutional causes of the problem, such as gender inequalities, welfare insecurity and the birth planning policies themselves, could gain more ground and feed into the formulation of different and more innovative policy responses.

Greenhalgh has argued that the Party's problematization of “surplus men” casts rural men as the perpetrators of patriarchy and rural girls and women as the victims. Hence, the policy responses to the SRB imbalance are all geared to helping females. She further contends that this gendered framing overlooks the suffering of all those who have been hurt by the nation's birth planning policies, including rural men and particularly those men who are forced to remain single.⁹⁴ Greenhalgh's argument that the harm associated with China's birth planning policies and its gendered distribution has been overlooked is immensely important, and if addressed, would open up possibilities for more humane policy discussions about, and responses to, the skewed SRB. Yet, this essay has also offered a different perspective to Greenhalgh's by showing that despite a “care for girls” slogan, the substantive policy interventions for addressing the SRB have not in fact been geared towards either recognizing the inherent value of girls and women or to advancing their rights (beyond the right to be born in the first place!). Instead, the core policy interventions for tackling the SRB problems have been geared towards encouraging rural people to limit their fertility and to enabling the state to make its “care” manifest to society.

91 Wang, Cai and Chu 2013.

92 Xinhua News Agency. 2012. “Official vows China will correct gender imbalance,” 30 May, npfpc.gov.ch/news/central, cited in Greenhalgh 2013, 142.

93 Li, Shuzhuo 2007, cited in Greenhalgh 2013, 142.

94 Greenhalgh 2013.

There are many reasons why the programme has failed to deal with the sources of gender inequality that underpin the SRB imbalances. A principal reason is that a simplistic association between gender discrimination and rurality facilitates a relatively uncritical analysis of the sources of the gender inequality that translate into SRB imbalances.⁹⁵ Specifically, this framing sidelines the inconvenient truth that the SRB in urban areas is also distorted. For reference, in 2005, sex ratios among infants younger than one year were 115 in cities, 120 in towns and 123 in rural areas.⁹⁶ The framing of the SRB, therefore, also glosses over the need for greater openness in order for individuals and groups to be able to research, debate and understand the complexity of gender inequality in Chinese society and its role in structuring family formation despite “modernization.” Ensuring that women receive more education is the Party-state’s preferred route to promoting gender equality.⁹⁷ Certainly, increased female education operated alongside other factors to help reduce son preference in South Korea.⁹⁸ However, as several scholars stress, an approach to promoting gender equality which centres on more education for females does not inevitably lead to a more balanced SRB.⁹⁹ Moreover, an increase in education cannot substitute for measures to counter discriminatory gender norms that exist within schools as well as in wider social, economic and political domains.¹⁰⁰ Hence, feminists’ involvement in civil society and in political life is also necessary, although in China this involvement would require a broader invigoration of political life and the policymaking process.¹⁰¹

Attention to the welfare needs of all rural people and to their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis urban residents is also absent in the formulation of SRB policy solutions. Instead, the material care on offer in the Care for Girls programme is conditional on the families’ compliance with a highly stringent version of the birth planning regulations. Moreover, the material benefits are mostly ad hoc and perpetuate a system of welfare provisioning that is place-based and bifurcated along rural–urban lines. Various studies suggest that, in China, economic precariousness and a lack of welfare security are associated with a greater SRB distortion, while welfare security, and particularly old-age security, is associated with a more balanced SRB.¹⁰² To cite one example, Ebenstein and Leung used data for the years 1991 and 2000 to investigate how variations in village participation in a now defunct voluntary old-age pension scheme under the Ministry of Civil Affairs impacted on the SRB. They found that in counties that had participating villages, the rate of increase in the SRB was 9 per cent lower than in other

95 Eklund 2011.

96 Hesketh 2009, 11.

97 Ross 2006, 27.

98 Chun and Das Gupta 2009.

99 Attané 2009, 99.

100 Ross 2006.

101 Lin 1996; Stromquist 2003 cited in Ross 2006, 27.

102 Attané 2009, 99.

counties.¹⁰³ Importantly, in 2009, the Ministry of Civil Affairs again took the lead in rolling out a rural pension programme.¹⁰⁴ Admittedly, the amounts offered have been relatively small, but the programme is nevertheless a step in the right direction because entitlement does not depend on individuals' compliance with reproductive policies.

The role of the birth planning policies in exacerbating SRB imbalances has also been excluded from the framing of the social problem.¹⁰⁵ Some provinces observe a one-child rule, other provinces follow a 1.5-child rule, and there are even some counties and provinces that practise a two-child policy.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, a long-standing exception has been that when both members of a couple are only children, two children are permitted.¹⁰⁷ As a greater proportion of sex-selective abortions occur during second rather than the first pregnancies, in regions where 1.5-child families are common, SRB imbalances are higher; in regions where families with two children are common, the SRB is more balanced.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, in regions and in periods when the implementation of fertility limitation policies is stricter, thereby suggesting increased resistance from the local people, there is greater distortion in the SRB.¹⁰⁹ Over the past four decades, the population establishment has remained committed to fertility limitation.¹¹⁰ Moreover, as this article has shown, during the 1990s and 2000s this commitment to fertility limitation dominated the formal policy response to SRB.

New perspectives for shaping how the SRB is constructed as a social problem are urgently needed, and opening up the policy process beyond the monopoly of the population and birth planning apparatus and its focus on fertility limitation would help. Optimistically, during the course of 2013, there were indications that this could be happening. In March 2013, the Ministry of Health merged with the State Population and Birth Planning Commission, a change which some scholars have speculated may signal an easing in birth planning policies.¹¹¹ Then, in December 2013 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed a resolution permitting couples with one member who is an only child to have a second child.¹¹² This relaxation fell short of the blanket two-child policy that many scholars have argued is appropriate given that the country's total fertility rates are well below replacement level and that the social costs associated with such strict anti-natalist policies are so

103 Ebenstein and Leung 2010.

104 Ibid.

105 Greenhalgh 2013.

106 Michelson 2010.

107 Wang 2011, 179.

108 Michelson 2010.

109 Greenhalgh and Li 1995; Michelson 2010; Wang 2011.

110 Wang, Cai and Chu 2013; Cai 2012.

111 Eggleston et al. 2013, 510. I use the term "birth planning" rather than "family planning" because this is a more accurate translation of the Chinese term *jisheng* and it more closely reflects the nature of the institution's work. In this I follow Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005.

112 BBC News. 2103. "China formally eases one-child policy," 28 December, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-25533339>.

high.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the relaxation may indicate that some reordering of the policy priorities of the population establishment – and the unseating of fertility limitation as the number one priority – is on the horizon.

摘要: 由于许多父母重男轻女, 中国的出生性别比失衡。在本世纪第一个十年里, 出生性别比徘徊在 120 个男孩比 100 个女孩左右。作为对策, 本世纪初, 中国政府启动了一系列‘关爱女孩’的政策措施。此文用一个案例, 探讨出生性别比失衡这个社会问题如何导致某一类政策的形成和采用而排除其它的政策回应。分析表明, 出生性别比失衡被归因于农村人民在文化和经济方面的欠缺, 而没有表述为需要确认女孩的内在价值, 或需要承认所有农村家庭基本的社会福利权益。如此构建的出生性别比失衡, 使国家得以推行‘用关心来控制’的对应政策, 其中包括思想教育和有条件的物质利益或制裁, 同时回避了体制基础的问题。

关键词: 性别比例; 社会问题; 人口政策; 关爱女孩行动; 思想教育; 社会福利; 中国农村

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